



What is chemo brain?



“Chemo brain” is a common term used by cancer survivors to describe thinking and memory problems during and after cancer. There is no known way to prevent chemo brain.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Problems with thinking and memory

- Forgetting things, such as recalling a conversation (verbal memory) or an image or list of words (visual memory)
- Trouble concentrating, meaning you can't focus on what you're doing, have a short attention span, or may easily “space out”
- Trouble remembering new details like names or dates (short-term memory)
- Trouble remembering words, such as not finding the right words to finish a sentence
- Feeling of mental foginess

Problems with getting things done

- Trouble doing more than one thing at a time, like talking on the phone while cooking
- Trouble learning new skills
- Taking longer to finish things or being disorganized

Chemo brain can happen even if you don't get chemotherapy or cancer treatment. It's also called:



- Brain fog
- Cancer-related cognitive impairment
- Cognitive dysfunction
- Chemo fog

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What causes chemo brain?

Doctors don't fully understand what causes chemo brain. There are likely many causes, such as:

Cancer

- Stress from being diagnosed with cancer, which may lead to anxiety or depression, and make thinking and memory issues worse
- Certain cancers that make chemicals that affect memory
- Cancers that start in the brain or spread to the brain and may cause changes in thinking

Cancer treatments

- High doses of chemotherapy or radiation therapy
- Radiation therapy used on your brain
- Other medicines, such as steroids and anti-nausea or pain medicines

Other causes

- Having a higher chance of chemo brain due to heredity (genes passed down from your parents)
- Younger age or older age at the time of cancer diagnosis and treatment
- Other health conditions, such as:
 - Diabetes
 - Depression or anxiety
 - Thyroid problems
 - Not getting the nutrition your body needs from the foods you eat



Chemo brain can be a frustrating and life-changing side effect of cancer and its treatment, no matter what causes it.

How long does chemo brain last?

Chemo brain can start any time during or after treatment. How severe symptoms are and how long they last is different for each person. For most people, it only lasts a short time. But others can have long-term or even delayed symptoms.



When should I see my doctor about chemo brain?

If you are having trouble with memory or thinking, see your doctor.

Write your symptoms in a journal and tell your doctor if:

- **These problems prevent you from working.** Ask your doctor for a referral to an oncology social worker or other professional who can help you understand your options, such as applying for disability benefits.
- **These problems make it hard to do your job.** They may refer you to an occupational therapist or a neuropsychologist (who studies the brain) who can help you adjust to your current job or find a new job.

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